

Vermont's Regenerative Agriculture Certification Program

Vermont Senate Bill 159

<http://legislature.vermont.gov/bill/status/2016/S.159>

Executive Summary

Soil is the key element in all of Vermont's goals for natural resource conservation. It gives us: clean air, flood protection, food, feed crops, clean water, fuel, fiber, and so on. Protecting and rebuilding our state's soils should be a top priority for any environmental policies created and promoted by the state.

The following soil regeneration program I propose would help Vermont:

- bolster our state's food brand by adding humanely-raised, pastured meat alongside our maple syrup and dairy industries;
- export more high-quality food products to urban centers;
- bring more money into the state without depending on tourism;
- conserve our small farms by opening up new markets and revenue for farmers;
- attract young people to the state by creating a supportive pathway to farming;
- increase our state's resistance to damage from flooding (a 1% increase in organic matter across 1 acre of land retains 16,000 more gallons of water—and we could add 1% per year in places);
- increase the capacity of our state's water table to help avoid droughts by keeping water in the ground (healthy topsoil slows water runoff and prevents evaporation);
- build a resilient local food system by producing more food here in the state;
- support our composting efforts & companies by building a strong in-state market;
- lead the nation in the discussion on reversing/battling climate change.

With its agricultural roots, small farms, proximity to urban markets, progressive/innovative population, strong food brand, and governmental accessibility, Vermont is poised to take the global lead on combating climate change through farming. Here's how we can start.

The Proposed Certification Program

Along the lines of the USDA's Certified Organic program, I propose a state-level Regenerative Farm Certification Program under which farmers can have their land and their methods certified by the state as regenerative. The state would certify farms and farmers that have been able to prove over a three-year period that:

- their land is building topsoil year-over-year, or;
- their farming methods are sequestering carbon year-over-year, or;
- their soils contain an increasing percentage of organic material year-over-year, or;
- via some other verifiable, and quantifiable method.

Once the certification was awarded, regenerative farmers could use the regenerative label to boost their marketing efforts—particularly out-of-state where urban consumers are looking for consciously-raised, environmentally-beneficial food sources.

Vermont would become the first in the world to implement such a certification, thereby taking the lead on the fight against climate change and shifting the focus of the global discussion from vague doomsdayism to hope and progress.

Programs That Could Follow...

Once the certification program was in place, Vermont could explore ways to compensate farmers for doing the work of regenerative farming.

For example, farmers could be paid some amount of money for each ton of carbon they've been able to sequester in a year. Or, they could be paid for each centimeter of topsoil they've been able to build. Or, they could be paid incrementally according to some other scientific measurement of their success. It is in the best interest of Vermonters to maintain and build healthy topsoil, therefore it is in the best interest of Vermonters to pay farmers to use methods that do so—instead of the opposite, which is all too common.

This program would be designed to:

- signal to America's young would-be farmers that Vermont is lowering the barriers-to-entry for farmers by providing a revenue stream to anyone who cares to take up regenerative farming and help us improve our state's soils and natural resiliency;
- signal to existing farmers that there are different methods of farming that don't create the problems of erosion, soil depletion, compaction, drought, etc., and that they're worth exploring—if only for the extra revenue.

This program could be funded by a state-wide carbon tax to be paid by drivers at the gas pump and carbon-emitting industries. This would give Vermont another first-in-the-nation decisive move against climate change, and it is in-line with Bernie Sanders's recommendations.

Other Ideas to Consider

- Work with the state's private land trusts to offer additional incentives for conserving certified regenerative farms or transitioning farms to regenerative practices;
- Help fund a marketing campaign to promote Vermont regenerative-certified chicken, beef, pork, lamb, turkey, goat, pheasant, eggs, vegetables, etc.;
- Help regenerative farmers with their processing needs by allowing farmed meat processed at the state's custom butcher shops to be sold directly to consumers and in stores;
- Help regenerative farmers by opening up five state-run, state-certified processing centers around Vermont (operating at a profit for the state);
- Help regenerative farmers (in some way) with transportation of certified-regenerative meat to New York, Boston, Albany, etc.

1 S.159

2 Introduced by Senator Champion

3 Referred to Committee on

4 Date:

5 Subject: Agriculture; soils; regenerative agriculture

6 Statement of purpose of bill as introduced: This bill proposes to require the
7 Secretary of Agriculture, Food and Markets to establish a regenerative
8 agriculture certification program.

9 An act relating to establishing a regenerative agriculture certification
10 program

11 It is hereby enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Vermont:

12 Sec. 1. 6 V.S.A. chapter 215, subchapter 7a is added to read:

13 Subchapter 7a. Regenerative Agriculture Certification Program

14 § 4961. REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE CERTIFICATION PROGRAM

15 (a) Establishment of program. The Secretary of Agriculture, Food and
16 Markets shall establish a program within the Agency of Agriculture, Food and
17 Markets to certify agricultural land in the State as regenerative. The program
18 shall include a seal indicating that the Secretary certified agricultural land or
19 farm as a whole as a member of the Vermont Regenerative Agriculture
20 Certification Program.

1 (b) Standards of certification. The Secretary shall certify agricultural land
2 as regenerative if an applicant for certification demonstrates one of the
3 following criteria over a three-year period:

4 (1) topsoil on the applicant's land increased in each successive year;

5 (2) the applicant's farming methods are sequestering carbon in each
6 successive year; or

7 (3) soil on the applicant's land contains an increasing percentage of
8 organic material in each successive year.

9 (c) Standard testing. The Secretary of Agriculture, Food and Markets shall
10 conduct over a three-year period the following tests on the agricultural land of
11 an applicant for certification under this section:

12 (1) a total soil carbon test;

13 (2) nitrogen tests at three soil levels from an amalgamation of eight
14 sample points within a specified plot of land;

15 (3) a test for the presence or absence of inorganic carbon;

16 (4) a test of soil for water infiltration times;

17 (5) a test for bulk soil density;

18 (6) a test for percentage of bare ground cover within a specified plot of
19 land; and

20 (7) a test for diversity of ground cover within a specified plot of land.

1 (d) Certification; marketing. Upon determination by the Secretary of
2 Agriculture, Food and Markets that an applicant demonstrated compliance with
3 one or more of the criteria of subsection (b) of this section over a three-year
4 period, the Secretary shall certify the applicant's agricultural land as
5 regenerative. Upon certification, the Secretary shall authorize the applicant to
6 use the Vermont Regenerative Agriculture Certification Program seal in the
7 marketing and sale of agricultural products produced on the agricultural land
8 certified as regenerative.

9 (e) Testing fees. An applicant for certification under this section shall pay
10 to the Secretary a fee of \$500.00 for each year that the Secretary conducts the
11 standard testing required under subsection (c) of this section.

12 (f) Noncompliance. A farm certified under this section shall remain
13 certified until:

14 (1) the farm's tested agricultural land no longer meets at least one of the
15 criteria of subsection (b) of this section twice in any three-year period; or

16 (2) the Program participant chooses to withdraw from the Program.

17 § 4962. REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE CERTIFICATION PROGRAM

18 FUND

19 (a) There is created a Regenerative Agriculture Certification Program
20 Special Fund to be administered by the Secretary of Agriculture, Food and
21 Markets. Fees collected under this chapter, including testing fees or fees for

1 certifications issued under the chapter, shall be deposited in the Fund.

2 (b) The Secretary may use monies deposited in the Fund for the Secretary's
3 implementation and administration of the Regenerative Agriculture
4 Certification Program, including to pay Agency staff or contractors to conduct
5 the testing required under subsection 4961(c) of this title.

6 (c) Notwithstanding the requirements of 32 V.S.A. § 588(3) and (4),
7 interest earned by the Fund and the balance of the Fund at the end of the fiscal
8 year shall be carried forward in the Fund and shall not revert to the General
9 Fund.

10 Sec. 2. EFFECTIVE DATE

11 This act shall take effect on July 1, 2016.